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ABSTRACT

This paper follows a student teacher through a typical day in her high school student teaching placement, beginning with her pre-dawn departure for school, and moving from her preparations for class to her classes, which begin at 7:15 a.m. (homeroom, several periods of biology, lunch, planning, more biology, and biochemistry). She focuses on her relationship with the cooperating teacher and with the students in each class, discussing how she handles classroom problems as they arise. She notes differences in students' classroom behaviors throughout the day and discusses the difficulty of teaching biochemistry, which is a course she has never taken. After school, she still has grading and planning, so she typically stays 2 more hours. Often, she takes a nap, then wakes up later to plan some more. Some days, she cannot nap because she has after-school events and meetings to attend. Interview questions are appended. (SM)

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A Day in the Life of a Student Teacher

Rebecca Reiff

Paper presented at the
Annual Meeting of Ethnographic and Qualitative Research in Education
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A Day in the Life of a Student Teacher

My alarm resonates at 5:30 AM. I wake up, and the sky is still dark outside. Surely, the sky will be bright before I leave. There is something about leaving before sunrise that makes me feel I haven't slept. I hurry around the room throwing on clothes that make me look somewhat grown up. I just pray that I don't have a stain or an unmatched sock that my high school students will invariably catch. I take a deep breath and head out the door.

I arrive at school 45 minutes before classes start. I must be completely awake for first period biology. I make copies, check the labs to make sure all the materials are set up, and consult with my cooperating teacher about what I have planned for the day. Of course, I have already given her my lesson plans the week before but I want to be sure my day will run smoothly. Part of being a successful student teacher is trying to figure out potential problems. My cooperating teacher who has had 20 years of teaching experience helps me identify potential problems. If my cooperating teacher has never experienced a certain problem, she advises me to try out a solution, and then to see how it worked. I appreciate her giving me the responsibility to make real teacher-like decisions.

After my adrenalin is pumped and the plans for the day seem in order, I can now focus on the smaller tasks- I check the school mail and glance around the room to make sure there is no paper on the floor. I walk around the desks checking for undecipherable messages on them. I take a step back to see if the classroom is neat. I hope that the classroom looks this tidy at the end of the day.

Lesson plans are in order; the classroom is neat...now all I do is wait for the entourage of students to arrive. I stand outside in the halls and greet students as they

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walk into my classroom. Students form clumps in the halls as they lean against walls and stand in corners laughing and gossiping about the previous night. The 10th grade biology students are dressed up in costumes for a Masquerade Ball later that evening. Some students are wearing fairy outfits while others are dressed as themselves. While I am talking to one of my students about a make-up test, one of my students comes over to me and puts a heap of candy in my hands. I thought this was a sweet gesture. I then wonder what kind of grade she wants to get.

Students seem relaxed and carefree until the warning bell rings. Suddenly, teenagers stiffen up and have a daunting look of dread. The halls are filled with students trying to make it to their first period class in five minutes. The warning bell rings at 7:10 AM. As the time gets closer to the late bell, students dart up and down the halls. The late bell rings. The time is 7:15 AM.

Homeroom: 7:15-7:30 AM

Students are expected to stay in their seats during homeroom. Some students get up to sharpen pencils and throw away trash. One student flicks another student on top of the head. I choose not to yell at the student about his behavior. Teachers can pick their battles, and I choose not to pick all of them. The majority of the students listen to the events for the day, the winners for the athletic events, as well as which committees are meeting that day. I plan to attend the cook-out for the marching band tonight.

First Period: Biology 7:35-8:30 AM

After 5 minutes of taking attendance and getting everyone situated, my cooperating teacher announces that grades have been wrong for the entire semester because he weighted the percentages incorrectly. My cooperating teacher motions for

each aisle of the classroom to go up to the front of the classroom to receive the revised grade. This takes another 7 minutes. I couldn't help but think that perhaps the students thought I was responsible for the grades being mixed up. I had actually discovered the mistake. By the time we started the lesson, 15 minutes had passed, plus we were already behind because school was 2 hours delayed due to fog so we did not have first period yesterday.

Because of the delay, I feel very rushed to get through the material and to catch first period up with the other biology classes. Part of a teacher's worst fear is to have classes of the same subject covering different material. I try to keep everyone on the same page. It is almost a nightmare when my biology classes are off by a day or two. I am frantically trying to catch them up to the other classes. Meanwhile, I have to come up with extra activities for the class that did meet. I questioned whether I could cover two class periods in one period. Surely this wasn't quality teaching. Compounding my concerns, I had never taught this material before so I didn't know how the lesson would work.

Since we are having a test on that Monday, I divide the students into 6 groups of 4 students. Each group is responsible for looking through their books to find out as much information on the topic assigned. I give each group an index card with a concept that would surely show up on the upcoming test. After each group has gathered information on a topic, the group spends 5 minutes explaining the topic to the rest of the classmates. I walk around and give each group overheads to help them explain the concepts.

One girl is sitting on the floor. I ask her why she was sitting on the floor and she replies, "I couldn't find a chair." Of course, there are plenty of chairs. She continues to

talk to her group members and says," I ain't doing no work. I have an F." The student remains seated on the floor. I walk around and answer students' questions. Some students explain that they don't understand. I hear one student say, "This is boring."

I try to make the activities fun and interesting but I can't seem to please all of the students. Some students just do not respond well to my lessons. I don't take their lack of effort personally; at least I try not to. The girl is still sitting on the floor. Other students have their hands raised. I go over to the raised hands. I gradually make my way to the other side of the room where the sitting girl is. I hear her say, "F@#*!" I am shocked. All I can say is her name in exasperation. If I send her out of the classroom to the principle, she doesn't learn the material either. This is a dilemma I will continue to wrestle with.

I see she is copying the answers from her group members who were doing their work. The sitting girl, obviously lying, "I didn't copy. I just didn't write down the answers." I very well couldn't accuse her of cheating without having proof. I check my watch and realize that it is time for the presentations.

Each group briefly discusses the topic while other classmates sit quietly. I ask questions to clarify ideas and hope that the other students are benefiting from this activity. Sometimes I have a hard time telling whether the students are enjoying my class. Some students seem to like the class whereas other students seem bored or impatient. As I am pondering these thoughts, the bell rings. Great, not every group finished. I dash out into the halls to assume the position of hall monitor.

Second Period: Biology **8:35-9:30 AM**

Another batch of students arrive and I begin to wonder if I have already told them information that I told the other classes. The classes run together. Sometimes I feel like a robot spitting out the same information several times a day. I even feel I have to tell the same joke to every class because the other classes might feel left out.

This time I explain my expectations for each student. I hope to prevent people from sitting on the floor and making his/her team members do all of the work. Everyone seems involved in his/her work until we are interrupted by some announcements that have nothing to do with our class. This seems to shift students' attention away from their assignment. I just hope they can get back on track again. I continue to walk around and answer students' questions. This class is not as rushed; every group has a chance to present their topic to the rest of the class. The bell rings. I let out a sigh of relief as I walk to the hallway because this class was not as bad as the last class.

I am intercepted by a student who stops me to ask how she can do better on her assignments. I skip hall duty so that I can meet with her. She earnestly explains to me, "I mean I do the work but I just forget." Not sure what to say next, I try to make her feel better by asking, "What can I do to help you out?" The girl is not sure and I am not sure either. Maybe these situations will be more natural in time.

Third Period: Biology **9:35-10:30 AM**

The students work quietly and cooperatively. Their presentations were really effective. I think they must have heard from the last classes what we were doing today. A couple of students started singing. I didn't mind the singing at first but after awhile I asked them to stop. Sometimes students will do something that is mildly annoying and

then they don't know when to stop. For example, one student keeps tapping his pencil on the table. Once or twice is fine but not constantly. Bell rings. Good, I can finally go to the bathroom.

Lunch Time **10:30-11:00 AM**

It is too bad I didn't have time to bring a lunch. I usually buy lunch from the vending machines. Lunch is really early for me. We have lunch at 10:30 AM. I am barely awake at that time. I usually go into the teacher's lounge and plop myself on the couch. I scarf my vending machine lunch down in 30 minutes. Surely, I will have heartburn. I have been told that teachers used to have lunch duty where they had to stand in the cafeteria and monitor the students. I am grateful for the time away from the students.

In the teacher's lounge, we try not to talk about school. Mainly, teachers shouldn't just use this time to gripe about students. I sit with my cooperating teacher and talk about the weekend's plans. She is very interesting because of all her experience. She is telling me about her stock options. Another science teacher sees me and mentions a science demonstration I could do that shows enzyme reaction rates. I am excited that I am treated as one of the teachers.

Planning Period **11:00-12:00 AM**

I usually spend this time planning for lessons, gathering materials for a lab, or reading information about my content area on the web. This time isn't sufficient to do all of my planning. I spend about 2 hours a night getting ready for the next day. I read the material I will be covering, I ask my cooperating teacher for hints about teaching the topic, and then I look through her materials to get an idea of how I want to teach the

lesson. After that, I sit down to write how I can teach a topic using as many teaching methods as I can remember. I look on the web to find additional lesson plans for my topic. My planning period does not give me enough time to grade papers. Some days I have to spend an hour and a half grading papers. I try to get as much work done as possible during this time but invariably I have to take work home with me. I even spend a couple of hours on the weekends preparing my lessons.

This planning period goes by way too quickly. I have barely started getting ready when the bell rings and I dash off to my next class.

Sixth Period: Biology **12:05-1:00 PM**

It is a well-known fact that students are squirmier after lunch. I don't know if research has been conducted on this phenomenon but all of my experiences have been the same. I would much rather have morning classes.

The students come in restless. There is much laughter and talking about their plans for the weekend. I remind students they are to be in their seats. One student is not seated. I ask, "When do you want your after school detention?" The student looks at me like I am crazy and exclaims, "What, an after school? Look at those guys who were late. I wasn't the only one!" I repeat, "When do you want your after school?" He, being the class clown, says, "At the end of the year." I shrug and let him know I am being serious. Great, I thought, now I have to stay after school too.

Fifth Period: Biochemistry **1:05-1:55**

Biochemistry is a class I have to teach that I have never taken. I have to study the content for this class a lot more than the other classes. I am relieved that this class is for the advanced students who have already taken chemistry and biology and just like

science. Students taking science for the fun of it is almost unheard of in high school. I am actually surprised that such a course if offered. I only have 13 students in my class. This small size allows us to do more than a larger class size would. Plus, they are able to work more independently so I don't have to plan as many activities. In the regular classes, I have to spend a lot of time planning for multiple activities since these students get bored more easily and then discipline becomes a problem. We work together on some stoichiometry problems, and then the students work in pairs to complete the practice problems. I am more of a facilitator in this class because the students can basically learn the material on their own but I am just here if questions arise.

The bell rings a little early today so that everyone can go to the prep rally. I didn't go to any in high school so I am tempted to miss this one but I need to be more of a role model. The pep rally is filled with screaming teenagers. I feel a little out of place but try not to look awkward as I try to find a place to sit. I recognize a few of my students and smile. I watch in amusement the energy level of all of these students. Now if I can just get them to be this enthusiastic about biology.

After School

Whoever said that a teacher was done when the final bell rang had never been a teacher. I might be relieved that classes are over and no one got hurt during the day but my work is not done. I still have grading and more and more planning. I usually stay two hours after school. I am so tired after school that I feel better when I take a nap. I then wake up later in the night to plan more. My sleep schedule is very messed up. I am not much of a morning person.

I will not be able to take a nap today because I am going to the marching band cook-out, and then to a meeting with my science education methods group. We meet at 7:00 PM and discuss problems we are having during our student teaching. We offer each other helpful advice. Compared to some of the other students, I have it pretty easy. Some student teachers have had horrible cooperating teachers and classes. One student complains that her cooperating teacher refuses to let her use any of his teaching materials so she must create everything from scratch. Another student teacher describes the dilemma of having to pay for her rent while she "volunteers" for student teaching. I felt fortunate that I had not experienced anything too out of the ordinary. I guess I am lucky with the students I have.

Interview Questions- Appendix A

1. What do you do to prepare for the day? What time do you wake up?

2. How long does it take you to prepare each lesson? To review the content material? To grade papers?

3. What do you do to relax during the day?

4. Where do you get the materials you need for each day?

5. Where do you turn to for emotional support? Content matter support? Discipline support?

6. What kinds of outside obligations do you have?

7. What are some of your daily responsibilities?

8. Was this a typical day?